

Author's Note: The following text is from a series of eight articles that first appeared in the Horizon's Magazine, published by Cooperative Resources International, Inc. The series titled Supervisory Skills for Farm Managers resulted from on farm video interviews with producers and growers from all around the country. The curriculum of supervisory topics presents the practices and supervisory philosophy used by large farm managers on their own farms.

Essential Ingredients of Effective Teams

(By Jim Henion, Cooperative Resources International, Inc.)

In business today, those responsible for hiring new employees emphasize that one of the key skills they're looking for in workers is the ability to function well in a collaborative environment of alliances, partnerships, and cross-functional teams. Yes, it's clear the age of the lone ranger, i.e. the employee who just minds his own business and works independently, is now gone. Today, the business environment is one of interaction, cooperation, and teamwork.

Jon Wheeler, Oord Dairy, Sunnyside, WA., agrees. He tells us, "The traditional business structure in corporate America is changing from a district or regional setup supervised by a manager to a new structure with teams and coaches. I think this change is spilling over into our industry as well."

Wheeler continues. "We are running big multi-million dollar businesses and we can't get everything done from the owner or manager's seat. To keep these farm businesses profitable, we need to look toward our workforce as truly being our most valuable resource."

Put another way, John Noble of the Linwood Management Group, LLC, Linwood, N.Y., tells us, "I think managers have to understand what they do well, and then surround themselves with a team of people who bring strengths where there are weaknesses."

Benefits - Teams Produce Better Results

A group of people working together in a team structure creates many benefits. Because teams bring together the best talents and expertise in a variety of people, one of the benefits of teams is they simply produce better results than individuals could ever accomplish working on their own.

Dairy Producer Hank Wagner of Wagner's Dairy, Oconto, WI., comments, "One of the benefits of teams is you can rise much higher than you ever could working as an individual. No one person can be excellent in all things. By having a team, you can figure out your weakest link and then bring in people who have strengths where there is a weakness. As an individual, it's hard to do that."

Doyle Waybright, Mason Dixon Farms, Gettysburg, PA., adds, "What we need to learn is how to find those individuals who have developed their skills to a very high level in one area of the dairy operation. If we can bring them into the team, then we can achieve a win-win situation."

Wagner concludes, "I can't possibly be as good as the people we have hired to be on our team. I am really enjoying all of the talents and skills these team members bring to our farm."

Teams are Great at Solving Problems.

A second benefit of the team structure is when a group of specialists focus on problems or performance issues, they'll always come up with much more creative and effective solutions.

"What I see in our team structure," reports Jon Wheeler, "is a group of people who are really aggressive in wanting to meet their goals. If something starts slipping, they usually know the source of the problem before I do."

Ted Boersma, dairy producer from Clovis, N.M. comments, "When our teams have input into what it takes to meet the farm's goals, and when they are involved in setting up the protocols and procedures, they have a tendency to correct themselves when performance slips. All we have to do is occasionally put the standards out in front of them and they take it from there."

Teams are also effective at correcting problems within the team. When an individual on the team falls short, other members of the team help that person to make the necessary improvement.

Wheeler continues, "When there is an individual problem, the team deals with it - not the manager. The lead person or the whole team goes to the individual who is falling short and talks to him privately. They point out what it is costing the team in performance shortfall."

Boersma adds, "When we have a team meeting and there is a performance issue, we just sit back and watch the team come up with solutions. If one team's results are a little slack, other teams will point out how they could do a better job if they would change something they were doing. The teams tend to create their own answers and their own solutions."

Teams Create Higher Job Satisfaction.

Farm owners, managers and employees report a number of ways the team approach creates more job satisfaction on their farms. The following lists some examples.

Flexibility in scheduling. Sean Jones of Jones Family Farm, Massey, MD notes, "Because team members are cross-trained for each other's jobs, the team structure creates more flexibility. If today isn't someone's normal day off, but they need to take care of a personal matter, another member of the team can step in to provide that flexibility. The team enables people to have time to do the things that are personally important to them."

Improved Communications. "We have two facilities," notes Ted Boersma, "One is operated with a team approach and the other is managed with a traditional structure. When I go to the traditional farm, I generally seek out only the herdsman to find out what's going on. When I go to the team facility, I can bump into anybody and ask what's going on and they can give me an answer. No matter how hands-on or how distant you are as an owner/manager, the team structure enables you to approach anybody on your facility and demonstrate they are just as important as anyone else. I think the team approach just cultivates more conversation."

Support when employees experience problems. John Lundine of C-BAR Jerseys, Mesa, Ariz., believes, "Teams are a big help when an employee has a problem, is having an off-day, or things are just not going well in his area. Other members of the team will step in and help out. This keeps attitudes high because they know someone will be there to help when they need it."

John Noble adds, "Nobody wants to fail. I think there is much less chance of failure when operating within a team. A team will help support another member who is struggling."

Maria Nye, Mountain View Dairy, Delta, Utah, adds, "You always know the team is there. You train them to pull together as a team so when the owner or the manager is away, they can run the farm without you."

Working in a team environment is more fun! Hank Wagner sums it up by saying, "When you have teams on your farm that work together, it's just more fun! There's probably no greater joy as an owner/manager than working with a group of people who are enjoying what they do, are excelling and helping the farm to be successful."

Essential Ingredients of Effective Teams

We've been talking about how teams have become the cornerstone of the modern farm operation. We've discussed a few of the benefits of teams including improved business performance, more effective problem solving, and greater job satisfaction on the part of farm employees who make up the teams. Let's now take a look at some of the essential ingredients of effective teams.

A clear vision and a common goal. The first of these involves the necessity of providing all team members with a clear vision and a set of goals outlining what you're trying to accomplish.

Jon Wheeler comments, "We need to share our goals and our benchmarks. We need to let people have input on how we can achieve those goals and not be a dictatorship."

Dan DeRuyter, George DeRuyter and Sons Dairy, Outlook, WA., tells us, "Pretty soon they're going to start looking for things that are problems that you may not even see out there. They come up to me and they'll say, „Hey, this feed is too wet." Or „Dan, I think this feed is too coarse or it's too chopped up." They know, because we've told them what it looks like. Now once they know what it looks like, they tell us. They know what success looks like."

Open communication and feedback. Rod Hissong, Mercer Vu Farms, Inc., Mercersburg, Pa., reports, "I've found most problems within teams result when there is poor communication. In my daily visiting with people and coaching, I try to stress how everybody's job is related to other jobs."

DeRuyter continues, "I think most people in their hearts want to do a good job. If we don't tell the teams what the cows are telling us about the job they're doing, they will assume they're doing a good job. Or, they will learn not to care because they are not getting any feedback from us."

Place people in positions where they can perform. The well known management guru, Peter Drucker has emphasized the importance of placing people in positions where they can perform their best work. Drucker has noted that most people do not achieve great success by trying to improve their weaknesses. Instead people succeed because they take advantage of and build on their unique strengths.

One of the great advantages of teams is they enable coaches to place team players in positions that utilize their unique talents and strengths.

John Noble emphasizes, "The most important task I have is to avoid putting square pegs in round holes. Every person has a different set of strengths and weaknesses. As a manager, it's my job to design career paths where people have the greatest likelihood for success."

Sean Jones adds, "You can have different kinds of players on your teams so long as they are positioned right. Not everybody can be a point guard. Somebody has to play defense."

Teams need an effective coach and team leader. No one would expect a sports team to win games without a top coach on the sidelines and a good team leader out on the field. One of the essential ingredients for an effective team is the people who serve in the roles of coach or team leader.

Ted Boersma adds, "When we first established our teams, we sent the players out onto the field, but we forgot the coach. We've learned that a team doesn't function well without a team leader and a coach. We've learned we need to constantly provide good people with coaching and training. We need to look for ways to refresh them in their areas of responsibility. And, we need to constantly keep the goals in front of them."

Make sure there is a TEAM at the top! Abe Harpster, Evergreen Farms, Pennsylvania Furnace, PA., concludes, "To foster a team structure on our farm, my brothers and I have to get along, work together and rely on each other's strengths."

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